



Bianca Stone

and the Sadness of Wholesale
Picture-Framed Hotel Artwork

Third Saturday Poesy Café

September 27, 2014

Presenter: Tom Corrado

Why Bianca Stone?

Shouldn't art take risks? Shouldn't it make it new? Shouldn't it expose our vulnerabilities? Our secrets? Our innermost thoughts? Shouldn't it do more than feed the status quo? More than entertain? Inform? Clarify? I say yes! I say poets should walk a greased tightrope. They should take chances, push the envelope. I like poets who prestidigitate words; who massage them; who work them in new, different, sometimes odd, uncomfortable ways. I like poets who are non-sequiturists; who play with words, pull them out of a hat, push them around, mix them into unconventional, but tasty, stews. I admire poets who are unafraid to move beyond the literal; who toggle between the real and the surreal; who try to mimic the process of thinking; who try to portray the experience of experience by capturing haphazard memories, odd associations, random images, scraps of conversation, the inner mumbo-jumbo of the mind, life's buzzing distractions. In other words (pun?), *I'm fascinated not so much by what poets say but how they say it.* I'm interested in texture and tone and musicality; I'm not interested in linearity, in story-telling, in picture-perfect representation. I like to think that open-ended poems or fragmented poems or just plain weird poems better invite (seduce?) the collaboration of the reader's or listener's imagination.

Bianca Stone Walks a Greased Tightrope

I was introduced to Bianca Stone through her illustrations for Anne Carson's *Antigonick* (New Directions, 2012) which, incidentally, is dedicated to Stone's grandmother, the poet, Ruth Stone (1915-2011). I was fascinated by the 33 ink and watercolor images on translucent velum, which seemed to bear little relationship to the text. Intrigued, but not so much that I dropped everything and began googling her. And yet her name became a mental post-it, and I began bumping into it on my poetry excursions. I started reading her poems, and liked them. And the more read, the more I liked. One of the first poems of hers that I read was *Reading a Science Article on the Airplane to JFK*, which begins:

*Today I flew over the Midwest
filling out a questionnaire
on the emotional life of the brain
and personal capacity for resilience
against despair. I was making
a sculpture of my limbic systems
in a huge conceptual neurosis.
Under the simulated
middleclass environment
of the fuselage
the snow was falling.*

*And in everyone's skulls
complex régimes went on and on and on.
I seek forever the right way to know this.
That there are bridges
not built in me. That there are areas
that do not light up -
You are at a party having a conversation
with an interesting stranger.*

. . . and picks up momentum as it struggles to distance itself from horrible, pervading grief.

This was good. I was impressed! But this was nothing compared with the awe I experienced upon reading the title poem in Stone's first full-length collection, *Someone Else's Wedding Vows* (Tin House, 2014)! I was dumbstruck. My head spun! The juxtapositions. The curves kissing the corner of the plate! Top-notch! Beginning - out of left field - with:

*The rise of Australopithecus. The weird clouds over Long Island
at the classic wedding. The crowd frightened of what it means
having O'Hara's avocado salad poem read.
It's an evil waste of time for me to congratulate anything.
Accuracy comes to me, slips out
in fragments of my earlier works recited
in the secret weapon defense committees.
I am president of the clams. Seduced by foodservice;
purple squid sinking in their own pitiful mantle,
irrevocable among the dinner rolls.
I would pay to feel good all the time.
But I'm telling stories to the churchless evening,
watching lost guests take paper plates to inoffensive tables
illuminated with Greta Garbo centerpieces.
Bring me to the oak out front and tell me you love me
I say to the family dog. The pool is lit with unscented candles.*

Yeah, with wordwork like this, I was caught – hook, line, and sinker!

Life

Bianca Stone is a 30-something poet, editor, and visual artist. She grew up in Vermont, in a family of writers and artists, began writing poems at an early age, attended Antioch College, and eventually graduated with an MFA in poetry from NYU's Creative Writing Program.

She is the author of one full-length collection of poetry, *Someone Else's Wedding Vows*, several chapbooks, most recently *I Saw The Devil With His Needlework* (Argos Books, 2012), and the poetry-comics *Because You Love You Come Apart* (Factory Hollow Press, 2013), and *I Want To Open The Mouth God Gave You, Beautiful Mutant* (Factory Hollow Press, 2012). Stone is the editor of *Ink Brick, A Journal of Comics Poetix*, founded in October 2010 and dedicated to work that crosses the borders between comics and poetry; co-editor, with her husband, poet Ben Peace, of Monk Books, a small press that publishes limited-edition chapbooks of poetry and art with a mission to make books as artful as the texts within; and Chair of the Board of The Ruth Stone Foundation - ruthstonefoundation.org - established in 2013 as a nonprofit literary organization created by the trustees of Ruth Stone's estate, with a mission to celebrate the legacy of the poet, Ruth Stone, and foster creation of the finest contemporary poetry and art.

Her poems have appeared in such magazines as *The Best American Poetry 2011*, *BOMB*, *Conduit*, *Crazyhorse*, *InDigest*, and *Tin House*. She lives in Brooklyn with her husband, Ben, whom she married on August 23, 2014, and their cat. She blogs at biancastonepoetrycomics.blogspot.com.

Sidebar: Very New Poetry

In April of 2014, as part of the Rensselaerville Library's month-long poetry celebration, I was asked to say a few words about *Very New Poetry*, loosely defined as poetry written since 1990. To prepare, I re-read Harvard Professor Stephen Burt's essay, *How to Read, and Perhaps Enjoy, Very New Poetry*, from his book, *Close Calls with Nonsense: Reading New Poetry* (Greywolf, 2009).

According to Burt, Very New Poetry:

- does not tell a story
- is hard or impossible to paraphrase
- teases, demands, frustrates
- incorporates data from a range of realms
- weds subjective (internal) and objective (external) realities
- tries to capture the random, irregular nature of experience
- mixes tragedy, whimsy, indifference, cheerfulness
- appears simultaneously attached and detached
- brings together diverse voices and sources
- consists of free-floating, discrete, seemingly unrelated lines with few transitionals
- uses sincere, non-ironic straight talk or everyday language
- is indeterminate and open-ended
- presents nonlinear declarations

- has a fragmented, interrupted, choppy rhythm
- moves away from the literal
- mixes the real and the surreal

Further, Burt suggests that when reading Very New Poetry:

- don't look for a story
- don't get hung up on trying to figure out what the poem means or what the poet is trying to say
- don't fight the poem, let your imagination interact and collaborate with it
- accept irrationality
- look for a persona and a world
- enjoy the words, the wordplay, the double meanings, the images, the sounds
- let the poem wash over you

In her introduction to *The Best American Poetry 1990* (Collier, 1990), Jorie Graham tells us that Very New Poems:

. . . do not let us become comfortable with plot, point of view, setting, eventually force us to read in a different way; force us to let music take the place of narrative flow; force us to let our senses do some of the work we would "normally" be letting our conscious minds do. We discover, in the process, that we can trust a deeper current of our sensibility, something other than the lust-for-forwardness, with all its attendant desires for closure, shapeliness, and the sense that we are headed somewhere and that we are in the hands of something. We are forced to suspend these desires, to let the longing stay alive unsatisfied; forced to accord power to a portion of ourselves and a portion of the world we normally deem powerless or feminine or "merely" intuitive.

Bianca Stone's *Very New Poetry*

Are Stone's poems examples of *Very New Poetry*? Quite simply, yes, because many of them meet Burt's criteria. They are like dream states - mixing reality and fantasy, bits of the real entangled with the surreal, transitions abrupt and unannounced, catching the reader off-guard, the whole difficult - or, impossible - to paraphrase. Stone masterfully uses everyday language to build strangeness, toggling between the real and the surreal with a series of declarative sentences, maneuvering between reason and intuition. In *Because You Love You Come Apart*, for example, she opens with *Your hair is wonderful today*, which is a fairly common remark one would make to another, but then, in the same tone, continues with:

This is a microscopic caress at a party

*that burns until 5 am
this is the dead fathoming
this is coming home with your gorilla heart all disordered.*

The reader is kept on high alert as Stone's earnest voice explores the range of that which *feels / detrimental and complicated and forever stimulating*, shifting between lighthearted observations and elemental yearnings, pairing social commentary with self-effacing confession, acknowledging her own complicity in this *full catastrophe* with humor and irony:

*What man does is build whole universes out of miniscule
disasters and educational degrees.
I have mine in an enormous envelope two feet behind me.
My name looks good in gangster font.*

jolting the reader from universal generalization to personal revelation to sarcastic commentary against a *New Yawk* backdrop of cramped apartments, dark bars, and subways, where players - especially 20- and 30-something women thirsting for something more - lend and trade their *bodies in the darkest rooms of Brooklyn*:

*I became a waitress who looked sad, dropping occasionally
into the bed of a maniac, who looked sadder.*

The melancholy, aimlessness, and dejection of such a life, however, is made palatable by the transcendent power of the imagination (and, by extension, poetry):

*Nothing bad can touch this life
I haven't already imagined.*

. . . and the value of human connection:

*we will perceive our own pain in others
And we will know if we are capable of loving them.*

Stone's poems, with their collaged images of her landscapes, her situations, her friends, her aspirations, her meditations, her demons, introduce us to her world - a world created not by fate but by choice. We are who we are by observing who we are with, by recognizing who we would like to become, by periodically reinventing ourselves, by recreating the past to preserve it.

There is the clear image

*of someone beside you who looks just like you
but can get bluebottle flies to land on her finger.*

Stone uses metaphor in unexpected, jarring ways that surprise and delight. In *Sensitivity to Sound*, for instance, she stretches the physical reality of sound, extrapolating from the familiar act of shaving her legs:

When I shaved my legs it was the sound of dogs barking

to the pleasure of catching rays on the banks of a river:

*I looked and saw my body sunning by the river
and the river was the sound of a circumstance of blossoms
and the bees that covered them were barefoot women on wet concrete.*

Of course, her poems have their share of non-linear declarations presented with a fragmented, interrupted, choppy rhythm, as in *Stories*:

*An uneasy crowd gathers in the morning sun
and I should live a little more each day.*

The marks on my arm

*appear in the cold.
In the shed out back, stretched*

*across the big chair,
there is a book about the brain opened*

on my lap. . . .

Stone's poems are fun, despite the thinly-veiled sadness of many, filled with mouth-watering switchbacks, highly charged, and, in many instances, fascinatingly weird, inviting the collaboration of the reader's imagination. They are the outpourings of a fantastically observant, wonderfully raw, unbridled spirit, willing to take on all comers - joy and sorrow - challenging the way we see relationships, addressing the longing and cost of human connections, offering clarification of puzzling encounters in an anti-sentimental, yet compassionate, game of chance, walking a greased tightrope.

Comments

Hers:

I can't edit as I go. [Composing on a typewriter] helps me relax and not overthink things. What sucks about [composing on a computer] is you don't have your very first draft [because] even while you write it you end up editing it. Those raw, imperfect impulses that come when using a typewriter or pen are really essential to the muse.

I'm an advocate for tone and strong voice.

I never want my readers to feel left out of the poem. I like to be raw and wild, and then rein in with clear, direct moments. Those are the moments in other people's poems that I savor, that I remember. And what I find is that those are the moments that are most plain. With something simple - like seeing one of your girlfriends at the bar eating French fries in the corner, while internally you're freaking about some ancient painful thing - that moment, of seeing her there - you appreciate those moments of respite. Like, you're trying to work out grief, and it's too devastating to talk about, so you smash it together with ordinary, but strangely joyful moments - and in the end it gets you there. It gets you closer and clearer to understanding grief.

We ignore the mystical and the surreal so much because we want to make sense of our lives. . . . We pit the two worlds . . . [real and surreal] . . . against each other needlessly . . . [which results in poems that] . . . I find too easy and flat. (*So what if you walked your golden retriever in the woods and found a crocus?*) But someone like Gertrude Stein or John Ashbery fills me with possibility and feeling, even if the strange patchwork methods seem disorienting for some.

[Poetry comics are] sequential art that uses poetry as the text.

I prefer to have the images move away from literal illustration of what the text is saying. I want to use the image as another element of form in poetry, to have the image offer more space for the reader to interpret and create meaning on their own.

[I] don't want to draw what's being said because that's redundant.

What happens around us is too complicated to ignore in poetry.

I have a teeny tiny red book of Shakespeare's *Henry V* that I got at the Globe Theatre in London when I was backpacking alone in my early 20s. I was extremely withdrawn back then and I read that teeny book all the time like a bible.

I've always had a great love of narrative. But I prefer also to allow surrealism in to complicate the narrative.

Collaboration is hard. Very hard. You make endless false starts, and you spend a lot of time alone, weeping internally, worrying about everything. But then you come together and put things together like a couple of curious, eager architects. You step back and you have this one giant product. And you're so proud. Your ego isn't too wrapped up in it, because you all did it together.

And when I draw - poof! There's suddenly a physical thing there, that can talk, that can move. And I take advantage of that. The body itself, the air around the body, the expression on the face - these things can work just like a poem. Speaking, but not saying everything.

I love a long single column with uneven lines that follows the music rather than the consistency of line break.

I'll be using a poem, and take a line out because suddenly, while it's all alone on the page, I realize it's not strong enough. Thus, it often creates the *non-sequitur* method that you find in more experimental comics and poetry. But also that method resists the narrative and allows more for music.

[W]hen I started to make . . . poetry comics, I knew I wanted the images to work in tandem with the poem, so that neither takes away from the other - so that they can complicate and inform one another. . . .

People have misconceptions of what poetry is. It's so narrow what people teach in schools, especially high school.

For me, what's so exciting about working on poetry comics is that it's so unbridled. I'm such a serious poet - when I write a poem, it's got to be perfect to be published and make a book. When I do a poetry comic, I feel so much more free to experiment and be messy and go all over the place, and I find it kind of liberating. It's liberating especially in the structure. I found that poetry workshops can be so claustrophobic and uninspiring and not generative. And then something like taking a poem and putting it with your own images - it's totally a relief and full of excitement.

Collaborating is such a hard and delicate and amazing thing. I mean, it's hard when you're working with somebody else's poems, where they're right there with you and you don't want to . . . you don't have as much license or whatever. They might not like what you draw, and it makes their poem not their poem anymore. . . . But working with somebody else, you actually have to establish

right away how much of yourself you can put into it. Because if you're drawing to their poem, and they don't want you to put yourself into it, then it's going to be more like illustrating somebody's stuff. So true collaboration really has to involve both people giving and working together to create something completely new. It's not the poem, it's not the drawing - it's a new beast all together.

There are some poems that I feel have space for more in between the lines, almost. I like to think of the image as another part of the form of the poem.

It's just what [Gertrude] Stein was talking about: letting images (just as words) go where they want. It's about allowing imagination into your process. Letting imagination cross the border of what you want to convey to the reader - what is perhaps appropriate or literal - and the unknown, the enigmatic. This is what I'm most interested in.

The more I try to define, the less I know about what any of it is. All I know is that I love making poetry and making art. It's important that the two come from the same place in me. The art is very similar to the poems - in its sense of movement and tone. Even its subjects.

Others:

Stone shares a kinship with Emily Dickinson; she is fascinated with domestic life, its quietness, and has a sort of *loaded gun* sexuality.
- J. P. Poole

Stone is somewhat an aesthete in the poetry world, particularly the Brooklyn milieu that in recent years has capitalized on an emerging style: toughly sentimental, dashingy ironic, and deceptively cagey writing. It's a world of young MFAs who run their own literary ventures, populate each other's pages, tirelessly give readings, and are surprisingly not so keen on positing Brooklyn the literary innovator of the Northeast.
- Matthew Daddona

Stone offers new entry points into imagination, all the while keeping us grounded in an emotional reality all her own, creating a moving experience that lingers. . . .
- Matt Bell

Bianca Stone's poems are powerful, moving, and original. There is an amazing image center in her brain! Her brain (psyche, heart) can wrestle the matter of life to the ground (a pleasure for matter), and shape change with it, and it does not give up its ghost but reveals, in joy and sorrow, its spirit. Stone's poems are highly charged, lively, and interesting. They are fiercely anti-sentimental, and

emotionally generous. They have a distinctive underlying grieving compassion. I see in her work the natural weirdness and leaping of our minds. But wilder! It's as if she can take her mind out of gear, out of its prosaic limitations, and overhear, and sing, the strange true thoughts and feelings we have when we're at our most genuine and unprotected. In her poems we're in the presence of a naked human voice, not concealing itself - or over-reaching to expose itself - which dives as deep as voices go.

- Sharon Olds

I read the work of our most brilliant young poets to be reminded that it is still possible, despite everything, for our abused and decimated language to ring out the difficult truths of full-on awareness. The best of them, like Bianca Stone, do not settle for mere cleverness. They know it is not enough to be brilliant, that it is essential in poetry not merely to report the miseries and blessings, but to transform them. When she says, *I saw the devil with his stitching techniques / textiles and shadow / saw his hands that never stopped* or *I found a small notebook called The People of Distress*, I really believe her, and believe she is going to the difficult places and writing these poems in service not just to herself, but to us all, so that we can go to them and together find a little hope.

- Matthew Zapruder

Let's say hypersensitivity ranks high up among poetry's necessary attributes. Let's say that to ride the back of a parable and make it past the bell rates further fervent notice, and let's say we want to pay attention to a poet who says *we will perceive our own pain in others / and we will know if we are capable of loving them*. Open the book, read this poem: *Reading a Science Article on the Airplane to JFK*, and then I'm confident you'll want to spend a lot of time with Bianca Stone's astonishing debut book.

- Dara Wier

We're introduced to collaged images of Bianca's landscapes, her situations, and the people she surrounds herself with. The line *But this is also your life made / with your clumsy hands* - indicates that it's not fate that brings us to the place we inhabit, rather it's that we choose to exist in certain ways. Bianca writes that the dead *want to be remembered correctly*. But it's too daunting to remember ourselves correctly. Instead we change to stay in synch with a projected version of ourselves. . . . We understand who we are by observing who we are with, or more effectively, by recognizing who we would like to become. You can preserve the past by recreating it, and by outsourcing yourself to a new persona.

- Alina Gregorian

Stone's poetry has the glow of 21st-century enlightenment and lyric possession. Hilarious and powerful, *Someone Else's Wedding Vows* will have you come to

terms with the vehemence of her magic.
- Major Jackson

[Stone's poems ask] big questions, ones about love and intellect and relationships and family - and they throw words and images at those questions again and again. Answers don't manifest . . . there is no finality of meaning, but that seems beside the point. What matters are Stone's attempts to parse the world around us. . . . Stone's poems avoid clear meaning, they even avoid concrete, static images at times, but what they don't avoid are those questions. Her speakers want to know why things are the way they are - in society, in love, in families - and she lets them ask, again and again, until they begin to toe the edge of understanding.
- Christopher Lowe

Drawing on the neurological, scientific, psychological, and even supernatural, [the poems in *Someone Else's Wedding Vows*] confront the difficulties of love and family. Stone rankles with a desire to understand, but the questions she asks are never answered simply. These poems stroll along the abyss, pointing towards the absurdity of our choices. They recede into the imaginative in order to understand and translate the distressing nature of reality. It is a bittersweet question this book raises: Why are we like this? There is not easy answer.
- *Tin House*

The poems in *Someone Else's Wedding Vows* are vibrant with a voice that sees the world from every angle. Entire poems down to individual lines challenge the way we see relationships, whether with another person or ourselves, leaping from the mundane co-existence of daily life to the wilder possibilities of imagination.
- Jolene Brink

Stone takes on the complexities of relationships, grief, and twenty-first century existence with a sweeping freshness that pairs societal critique with self-effacing confession.
- Abigail Ashford-Grooms

Stone's impressive debut offers new entry points into imagination, all the while keeping us grounded in an emotional reality all her own, creating a moving experience that lingers long past the book's last page.
- Matt Bell

Stone's debut offers a captivating mix of lyric and grit, juxtaposing Latinate and colloquial diction in unexpected combinations. . . . Familial and romantic attachment are central to the collection's thematic concerns, which Stone

explores without sacrificing her interest in the universal, evolutionary, and metaphysical.

- *Publishers Weekly*

The ceremony of life is central to *Someone Else's Wedding Vows*.

- J. P. Poole

Emails Between Me and Bianca

8/15/14

— Original Message —

From: Tom Corrado

To: Bianca Stone

Sent: Friday, August 15, 2014 10:39 AM

Subject: request from Albany

Hi Bianca!

I'm a member of a small poetry group in Albany, NY. Each of our monthly meetings focuses on one contemporary poet. I'll be talking about you on September 27th. I was wondering if you'd be willing to reply to this email with a few words about your poetry, your art, whatever. In the group's five-year history, I've made presentations on John Ashbery, Jack Gilbert, Mark Strand, Anne Carson, and, last September, Frank O'Hara (attached, to give you an idea). I've been writing poetry for over 25 years, and, like most (lol!), I have a poetry blog at www.scriptsfortoday.blogspot.com. Anyway, I love your stuff, and wish you all the best.

Tom Corrado

8/31/14

— Original Message —

From: Bianca Stone

To: Tom Corrado

Sent: Sunday, August 31, 2014 2:07 PM

Subject: Re: request from Albany

Sure! You can email me here. I'll see what I can do in the next few days. I just got married and I returned home yesterday, so I'm a whirlwind of emails and catching up.

Send a few questions?

Bianca

New Website: <http://biancastonepoetrycomics.blogspot.com/>

9/4/14

— Original Message —

From: Tom Corrado

To: Bianca Stone

Sent: Thursday, September 04, 2014 8:50 AM

Subject: questions from Albany

Hi Bianca!

Thanks so much for getting back to me, and congratulations and best wishes to you and Ben! I've put together some questions. Please don't feel you have to answer all of them. Pick and choose a few. I've also attached a pic of most of the members of the Poesy Cafe, and the pic of you that I'd like to use on the cover of my brief *Bianca Stone Information Packet!* (If you'd rather I use a different pic, please email it to me.)

Again, thanks!

Tom

Q&As

TC: Why do you write poetry? In other words, do you write poetry to tell a story, share an experience, make a statement, present an argument, offer an opinion, portray the surreal, or do you dispute the idea of trying to do “something” by writing a poem?

BS: I write poetry because I find it the most beautiful, complex art form there is. I'm convinced it's linked to the mysteries of the brain.

In my poems, I'm drawn to writing about the human condition. Like, how I don't know WHY we do what we do. So the more we write about personal experience, the more we can discover about humanity as a whole. You know? We give the gift of personal experience to others . . . and perhaps relating to one another.

TC: Unlike many other poets who are also artists but keep the two activities separate, you merge them. Are these activities for you symbiotic? Do they feed one another creatively?

BS: I'm okay with contradictions, and I don't believe in absolutes. I believe in approaching everything creatively, and I believe poetry - reading and writing it - informs everything I do. They come from the same place in me, but they are expressed in different ways. I like to explore, without thinking too much about it, the different ways of expression.

We're taught when we're young that we must be ONE thing, that we're not good artists because we can't make something realistic or whatever. But really, we're all capable of so much, and it's good to allow your different interests to inform one another. Even music, movies, whatever - let it all feed into your poetry.

TC: You've stated that you don't want your artwork to simply say what a poem is saying but to go beyond it, to have the images move away from literal illustration of the text: "I want to use the image as another element of form in poetry, to have the image offer more space for the reader to interpret and create meaning on their own." I love your idea of inviting the collaboration of the reader's imagination in experiencing a poem, but must ask why you did not include drawings in your first full-length collection of poems, "Someone Else's Wedding Vows?"

BS: Because it's poetry. And poetry is better without visual images distracting the reader. Image will always trump word, because that's how our brains work: as children we look to the pictures to make sense and meaning. We must train ourselves to read and think, closely, and deeply, and to create sense on our own. When you add in visual art it takes away from the powerful relationship between reader and poem.

In other words: there's my poetry, and then there's what I call my poetry comics. They are two separate things.

TC: You've stated that "I never want my readers to feel left out of a poem. I like to be raw and wild, and then rein in with clear, direct comments." As effective as this strategy may seem, I can't help but wonder if reversing it would be more engaging, i.e., begin with clear, direct comments to, in effect, "grab the reader," then introduce the raw and the wild. Your thoughts?

BS: Yes, absolutely. I never meant start with one, and not the other. But it's the ebb and flow of both that I like.

Poems

Several poems from *Someone Else's Wedding Vows* appear here:

<http://books.google.com/books?id=dV2oAgAAQBAJ&pg=PT30&lpg=PT30&dq=bianca+stone+the+rise+of+australopithecus&source=bl&ots=HUKlJEA8Pu&sig=MBKdbybd9ZcyjOXw12LOSQlNico&hl=en&sa=X&ei=yxsSVLa7AYTksASd6YHgCw&ved=OCegQ6AEwBQ#v=onepage&q=bianca%20stone%20the%20rise%20of%20australopithecus&f=false>

Someone's Else's Wedding Vows

The rise of Australopithecus. The weird clouds over Long Island
at the classic wedding. The crowd frightened of what it means
having O'Hara's avocado salad poem read.

It's an evil waste of time for me to congratulate anything.

Accuracy comes to me, slips out
in fragments of my earlier works recited
in the secret weapon defense committees.

I am president of the clams. Seduced by foodservice;
purple squid sinking in their own pitiful mantle,
irrevocable among the dinner rolls.

I would pay to feel good all the time.

But I'm telling stories to the churchless evening,
watching lost guests take paper plates to inoffensive tables
illuminated with Greta Garbo centerpieces.

Bring me to the oak out front and tell me you love me

I say to the family dog. The pool is lit with unscented candles.

Hillery stands on a chair;

we're taking the wedding photographs,
practicing someone else's dutiful permanence.

Clusters of sequin at the bar.

A hand reaches around the white waist and considers literature
for the first time in months -

this is the sea that arranges inside us,
the burning ship that drifts with its burning, anxious crew -
the rest we can sum up in several lines about perpetuity.

The rest we can owe to our complex digestive systems
working out the squid covered in light-reflective cells,
changing color according to the gut
which humans will someday be able to do.

This is a colder evening in September.

The sun drapes its modern dread across everything.

The front lawn has never had its chance with violent, unkempt beauty -
but something dark stirs in the incipient mums.
I want to embrace whatever is firmer and bigger than myself.
Like the sound of wind around a tent
or everyone inventing their own colloquial happiness,
acting out too bored or wired
with rancor to stop eating. And it's true
I spent my whole life in fear of sharing my mind
but with a longing for it to be taken.
Year after year I could not even order myself to be touched.
I became a waitress who looked sad, dropping occasionally
into the bed of a maniac, who looked sadder
and meaner. I should have gone out into the field every night
to watch black bears growl in honeysuckle.
Or absorbed myself in the essays of Empson, which I never finished.
I'm still somewhere in the monuments of Vermont,
exhibiting relatively high intelligence.
And where it's driest I sit down with my wet drink.
I drink for the incidental. The heart of dust.
For my family and all their uneven moods.
For this audience of discreet psychotics
posing for photographs.
For the living deer ravaging gardens.
For the touch of sub-shrubs: lavender,
periwinkle and thyme -
touching the lingering otherness -
for this not being known,
rarely knowing
and for the ordinary monstrous knowing I love.

Because You Love You Come Apart

Your hair is wonderful today.
This is a microscopic caress at a party.
This is the dead fathoming.
This is coming home
with your gorilla heart all disordered.
This is feeling like a steamboat
swaying at the wharf at midnight.
A picnic bench weathering
in wind. But this is also your life made
with your clumsy hands -
your brain lighting up

when you see a beautiful woman
eating French fries in a dark bar.
Your head is split down the middle by a brook;
each hemisphere, divine, witchy,
out of the depths - your trouble,
your grief speaking, your cartoons.
The crazy, absent fathers
all breaking wind in a fire
and the fire engorged.
And your heavy body is getting up and going.
This is starting a sentence with
I've never told anyone this.
And you are gruesome, hungry
at the edge of the earth
where the dead wait it out.
From a babble in the ground
in a vortex of quilts and roots:
they are still listening.
They want to be loved.
They want to be remembered correctly.
We bring ourselves to the river
and we feed ourselves coffee and blasts of airborne opiates.
This is bone-dust. A fistful of mind.
The collected writings of Dante
that cover everything in a brunette wood.
There is the clear image
of someone beside you who looks just like you
but can get bluebottle flies to land on her finger.
This is the optic nerve
in endless reflections of your friends.
This is your friends making you a massive cake
filled with blackbirds and figs,
making halos with their hands,
saying loyal things
and getting emotional.
This is leaving a dark bar with them.
In the cab home you lay in each other's arms.

You Were Lost in the Delta Quadrant

You entered at the badlands with your hair in a bun.
You missed a certain moon.
You prevailed through a chilly reception from your new friends,

stunning yourself with visions.
I was moving like a monsoon through a forest.
I was thinking about where I saw myself in two thousand years
and where I saw myself was a tiny subspace ripple
sliding through the corridors with a plastic horse in my hand.
We were in stasis for 17 days and when I woke
yours was the first face that I saw.
I didn't care that our disease
was incurable
because it was only you and I
that incubated it.
You were a governess and I was an energy field.
You drank vegetable bullion, suffering in solitude.
I wanted to bloom in a field of toxic dust
and you talked me out of it.
In your spare time you sewed a blanket, your strange femininity
like a hybrid flower where I was confined.
I cut a lock of your hair with a Neolithic stone
and with it I made a fire.
You put a handful of worms in my mouth to keep me alive.
You put yourself in between a planet and missile.
You fell in love with a computer-generated father of two
and broke his heart. You were frightened.
I told you I could be trusted. I escaped in a tiny ship.
I had a plan. You gave a speech.
You wanted to gather energy from a cloud of purple light
and you were secretly all along
assembling your manifesto
through a series of captain's logs.
Once, there were two of you
and you each wanted to die for the other's greater good.
You fought over the other's right to live.
You respected and contradicted yourself.
At the last minute of the self-destruction sequence you died
and you also continued on.
You wanted to brush a strand of hair away from your face
but you didn't. Your arms were supplemental.
I saw you in a dream intruding on another's dream with diplomacy.
I told them to take you away at once
and then shook without you in my presence.
I wanted to live with you on an uninhabited planet
and build you a house. You wanted to see Bloomington Indiana again.
You look good in red.

Once, you woke up beside a God
and were furious at his presumptuousness.
You wore a scarf of alien silk.
Became repulsed by lavishness and empty hedonism.
I was in a bad part of Brooklyn
and you were in my mind internalizing sadness.
Making scary situations sexy.
Making lingerie on shimmering bedspreads militant.
You came into my mind and I made you more tea
we talked about the past. I said too much -
the sort of noise one makes
with a flask; cognitive behavioral therapy
barking like a seal in a mid-sized pool of my brain.
The more I drank the more deliberately I defended my haircut
- which lead me to family - those broken snipers
in their unpeopled region of space - each shot silent,
each bullet like a shooting star across a prehistoric sky -
I was evolving. Picturing myself prevailing through a series of obstacles
equal to iridescent natural disaster,
my head stuck in a banister of longing. I stood
a little behind you taking notes.
You sent me on a secret mission every night.
And there was a beautiful gash on your cheek.

Sensitivity to Sound

When I blew smoke rings
they were blindfolded geese in the air,
they were ships docking at my face.
At night I heard the mice screwing in the walls,
Heard them stop, heave into one another, flail back
onto the pink spun insulation
and I heard their terrible dreams begin.
When I shaved my legs it was the sound of dogs barking.
Not the low, consistent bark
but the shrill ones that rise and fall in intensity.
My eyes made the sound of a date being set,
of a photograph being taped to the wall.
When we kissed it was whiskey with ice -
when we kissed it was two swordfish, vaulting -
when we kissed it was hay being torn off the bail by a mouth -
when you went to the dip of my neck,
it was the sound of a fur coat being buttoned -

In the rain I heard each drop crossing the immaculate bridge
of your nose. Your penis lifted
like a crane lifting a piano to the top floor.
In storms I could hear earth.
From across two states I could hear my mom reentering the atmosphere,
a demigod in her purse. I could hear her sadness
converting itself to pure energy.
I could hear her crushing a carpenter ant with her thumb.
I could hear her hearing the cheese and whey factory hum.
I looked and I saw my body sunning by a river
and the river was the sound of a circumstance of blossoms
and the bees that covered them were barefoot women on wet concrete.

The Future is Here

Man burns at a certain degree
but I always burned a little slower.
When I went into school
I left a trail of blackened footprints.
There was knuckle down the side of the hallway
to my classroom of spelling words, never starred.
At the end of the earth
we'll be locked in our own spelling mistakes.
Our arms around the legs of our mother
so she won't leave. Our heads filled with beer, the light
receding. What kind of death is reserved for me?
The green plastic soldier has his gun up against everything.
And what does one do with a gun really?
I've only held three in my entire life.
The third I held was the first I used.
I was with Liana and her father, deep in the woods of Vermont
when she was staying with me in the heap.
I shot at a beer can until my hands went numb.
And I loved her the whole time.
With car accidents and barbiturates. The way
she got wasted and knocked her teeth
into her lap and told me
I loved her too much - what was all that?
What man does is build whole universes out of miniscule
disasters and educational degrees. I have mine in an enormous envelope
two feet behind me.
My name looks good in a gangster font.
It makes me want to alight on the thigh of my beloved

like a moth
because I know all careful grief
comes out from behind the thigh
and makes a fist at the grey sky above Brooklyn.
The destroyed continue
into the snow-filled future, shoveling.
And love is either perpetually filthy
or intermittently lewd.
I'm sweeping the entire apartment because it's mine forever.
And that's valid, too. Domestic eroticisms. The way
he gets up out of bed before you
and puts on clothes and can't find his keys.
All of it, without parents, without children, without roommates.
It feels good to get something
back. And the whole feels
detrimental and complicated and forever stimulating.
Which is why we live - and why we send out
balloons into the atmosphere
with notes tied to them that say:
Nothing bad can touch this life
that I haven't already imagined.

Stories

An uneasy crowd gathers in the morning sun
and I should live a little more each day.

The marks on my arm
appear in the cold.
In the shed out back, stretched

across the big chair,
there is a book about the brain opened

on my lap. Enough about brains
I say to my brain.

Press Enter
and make vigorous love

until you feel less huge
and more human.

If I had a yard I would abandon
washing machines in it

then listen to that song that gets me
late at night,

my friends' poems
circling my head like a flock

of yellow finches.

I believe in our pets buried
in the pines.

I beat the hell out of a white handkerchief
before waving it.

Do you know any horror stories?
Every night I tell God one more

and like Scheherazade, for this,
he keeps putting off my death.

The Abominable Mystery of Flower Evolution

the little wishbone of a rotisserie chicken
under clouds pretending to be water
our un-publishable déjà vus
a mint condition snake skin
your clothes
my heart going to ruin
your genetic Polish material
swapping spider orchids for calla lilies
for snowy roses
I am reflected by you
in a glass marble twenty feet away
some trapped vigor in your eye
the pitying turtledoves
feeling
my wooden leg shake
I have the same basic material as a cricket
lifting my violin
unable to articulate the grasses rubbing

the inadequacy of modern apples
scent of all the orchards in Vermont
counting each odor we come across
dead skunks still emitting their passive aroma
blowing over the milk cows
who wait painfully
to be milked -
steam from the chicken pulled apart
some dumb autumn sleep
as fathomless
as good
as the personal laboratory
of great losses

A Bewilderment

I have lost all luscious dreams
beyond all kingdoms of thought.
But then I feel a little happy thinking of you
the way we invite our love to the table
to eat what's left; I make a stream
connecting the baseball card in my wallet
with the you in my mind.
Later the Ambassador
to the Interior wants to negotiate
without radiance
on her unimagined furniture.
She is a photographer standing at the tiny gate
beside Niagara's escarpment.
My religion appears ruptured with a honey-smelling tree,
something with one millionth of an inch
from rapture,
indulging in meaning and quiet panic.
See how the sun carries certain weight.
It looks like a wild egg
from a prehistoric bird broken open
on a baffled hill. I want to go out
and ride the back of a parable
or walk up and down the city looking
for something that thrilled me back in the day.
Back in the day I tore
jubilant Edwardian script
across a savannah.

I wrote that there was no
stopping a forest
from taking what it wanted.

Elegy Regarding Your Elegies

All of your giant beige bras
floating up into the atmosphere
the chimney filled with broken blue eggs
the porch losing its wicker mind
I mistake one living cell for another
your hand on the mallet
of my life - you come, detonating in the air
with your own grief
it's not mine it is
the worst thing that has ever happened
watching mice eat through sheets forever
the world begins as a wolf tied to a flower
can you see how it happens
like that? something too violent
attached to something
too living

Driving Our New Car

Orchard, a beautiful word I keep in myself.
Like the word Jellyfish. And the word Chimney.
I looked in the mirror this morning and felt my age
like a tremor from a distant fundraiser. My face
dropped in a glass. My cheeks, distant burning ships.
And it is the month you and I have joined together
to not drink. But today I am hung over.
I imagine a small stage in my mind
where I perform precise homeopathic acts,
the brain systems like wild apple trees,
the moon erasing itself with a wet thumb -
Our car is so clean, I marvel that it is ours.
Your father had the wipers and brake pads replaced
before he set us into it,
two shy giants locking into their ship.
We drove it to the city, filled with vanity and fear, your hand
on my leg. When I was a child there were always
McDonalds wrappers on the floor. The dog slept on the back window.

When we rolled down the hill
my brother or I would pull the brake
and wait for mom to come back - lady of delicious sweets,
smoking out the window -
the car was always
an extension of her: parent, vessel, the
sticky seatbelts forever released -
And all night I shouted at friends from college. I stood
in the old cafeteria. I could see in the distance, also,
that the world was ending
in dark explosions of feathers.
When I woke up
I drove our car slowly around the blocks
looking for a new spot. I watched the street cleaner go by
like a fast, dumb dinosaur
that eats only carrion.

Relaxing Sounds of the Ocean

the body a soft grape
punctured with television
the foray of pleasure
the handsomest man at your loins
sensing that Relaxing Sounds of the Ocean
is not as good as Jungle Birds of Nature and Small Creatures of Tranquility
your mind suffering into a colorful powder swept carefully into a dustpan by
Batman and Robin
the champion of a high school football team running his finger along the edge of
his lover
Gods consulting clouds
evaporating into the mouths of airplanes
Ben telling you about the known universe
his maps of star systems
his passages about the future
his own psychic teenage heart still agonizing
your twin brother a billion miles away ordering a micro-brew
the women in the locker room
with areas of bright red skin
drying
their hair blowing back like their standing on the edge of a cliff
about to save the world
or end it

Reading a Science Article on the Airplane to JFK

Today I flew over the Midwest
filling out a questionnaire
on the emotional life of the brain
and personal capacity for resilience
against despair. I was making
a sculpture of my limbic systems
in a huge conceptual neurosis.
Under the simulated
middleclass environment
of the fuselage
the snow was falling.
And in everyone's skulls
complex régimes went on and on and on.
I seek forever the right way to know this.
That there are bridges
not built in me. That there are areas
that do not light up -
You are at a party having a conversation
with an interesting stranger.
You are in a restaurant and the service is bad.
You have experienced profound grief -
how do you react to this?
Down on the ground your family
writhes. Down on the ground
you are surrounded at Starbucks
with a terrible glow.
And you have seen someone you love,
with a colossal
complex vehemence, die.
And it is pinned under glass
in perfect condition.
It is wrapped around you
like old fur. You've looked at the sky
until your eyes touched
zodiacal fantasies - right there in the void.
You know this. That the body lays down
while the mind bloats
on intellectual chaos.
And you have just eaten
a bag of cinnamon flavored chips
and assessed that if you met

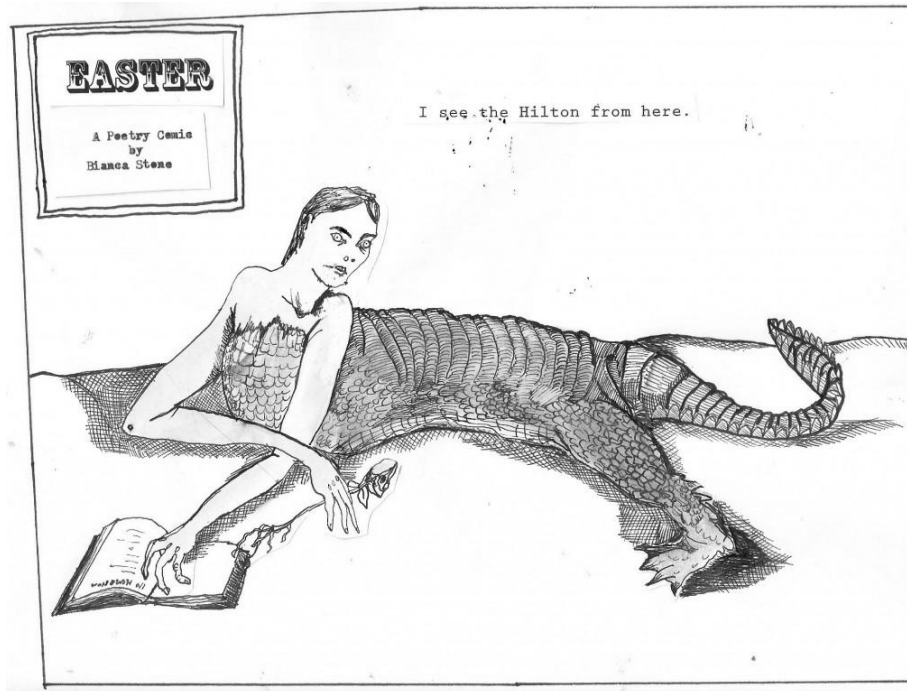
a wonderful new person
who ran from you in horror
you would fill their space
with calculated desolation.
Thus, you are waking up
having traveled through time.
You are looking down
at the Statue of Liberty,
garden gnome with her arm in the air,
her head full of tiny strangers -
And you hear crickets. Lined up. Playing
their creepy violins.
And you want to be good.
You want to be liked.
You want to recover.

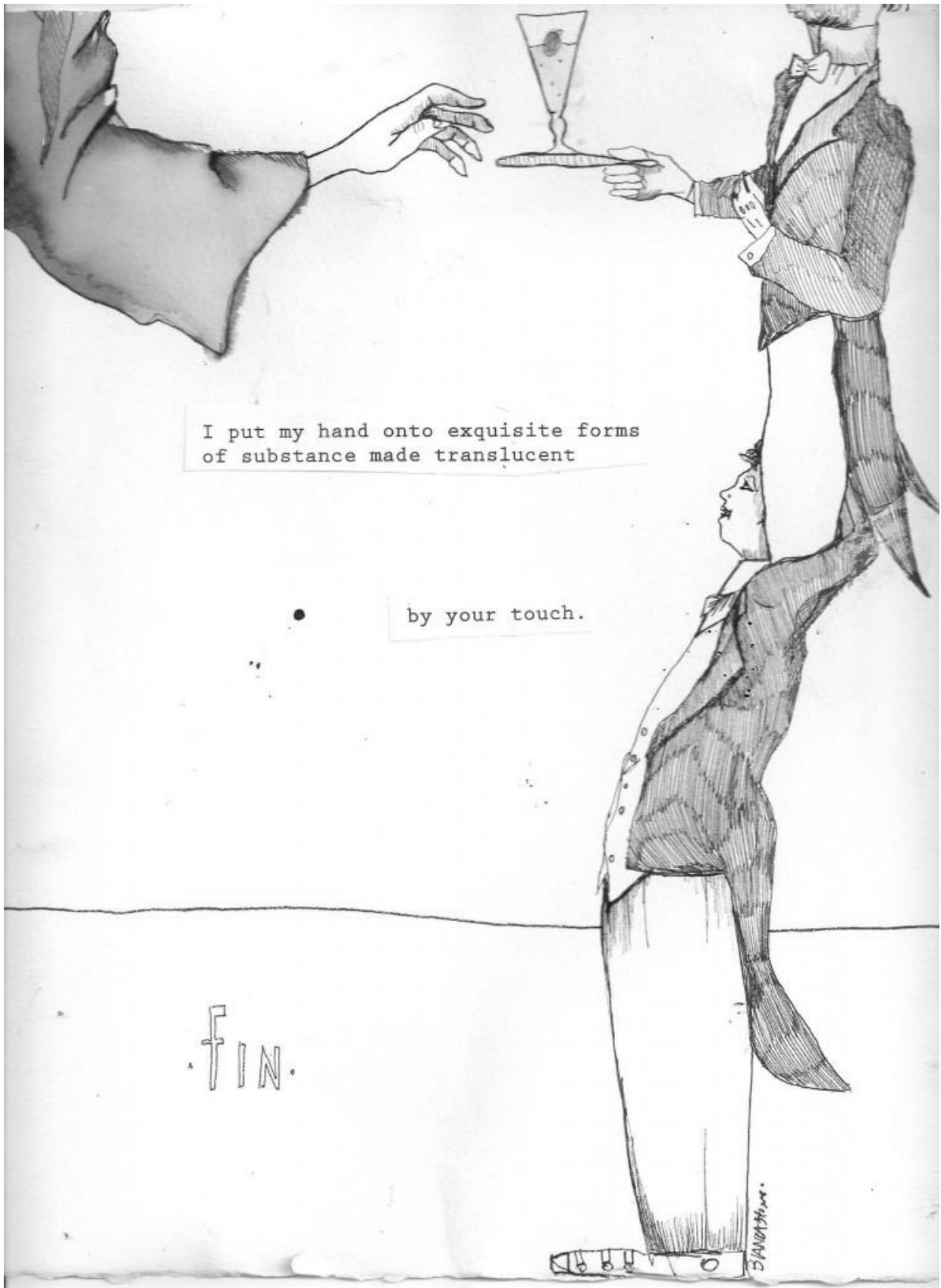
Making Apple Sauce with my Dead Grandmother

I dig her up and plop her down in a wicker chair.
She's going to make apple sauce and I'm going to get drunk.
She's cutting worms out of the small green apples from the back yard
and I'm opening up a bottle. It erects like a tower
in the city of my mouth.

The way she makes apple sauce it has ragged
strips of skin and spreads thickly over toast.
It's infamous; eating it is as close to God as I'm going to get,
but I don't tell her. There's a dishtowel wrapped around her head
to keep her jaw from falling slack -
Everything hurts.
But I don't tell her that either. I have to stand at the callbox
and see what words I can squeeze in. I'm getting worried.
If I dig her up and put her down in the wicker chair
I'd better be ready for the rest of the family

to make a fuss. I better bring her back right.
The whole house smells of cinnamon and dust.
We don't speak. She's piling the worms up in a bowl
and throwing them back into the yard.



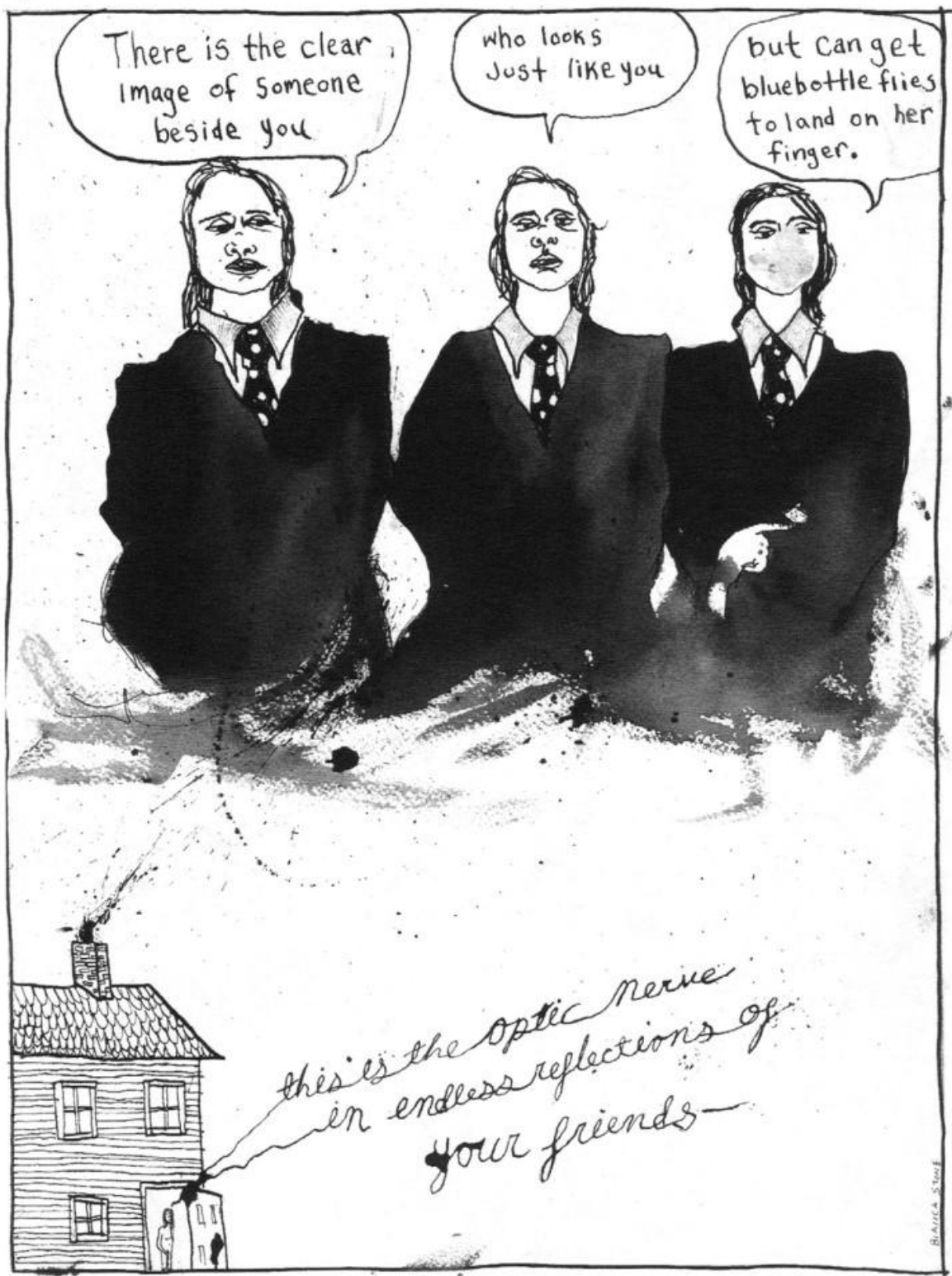


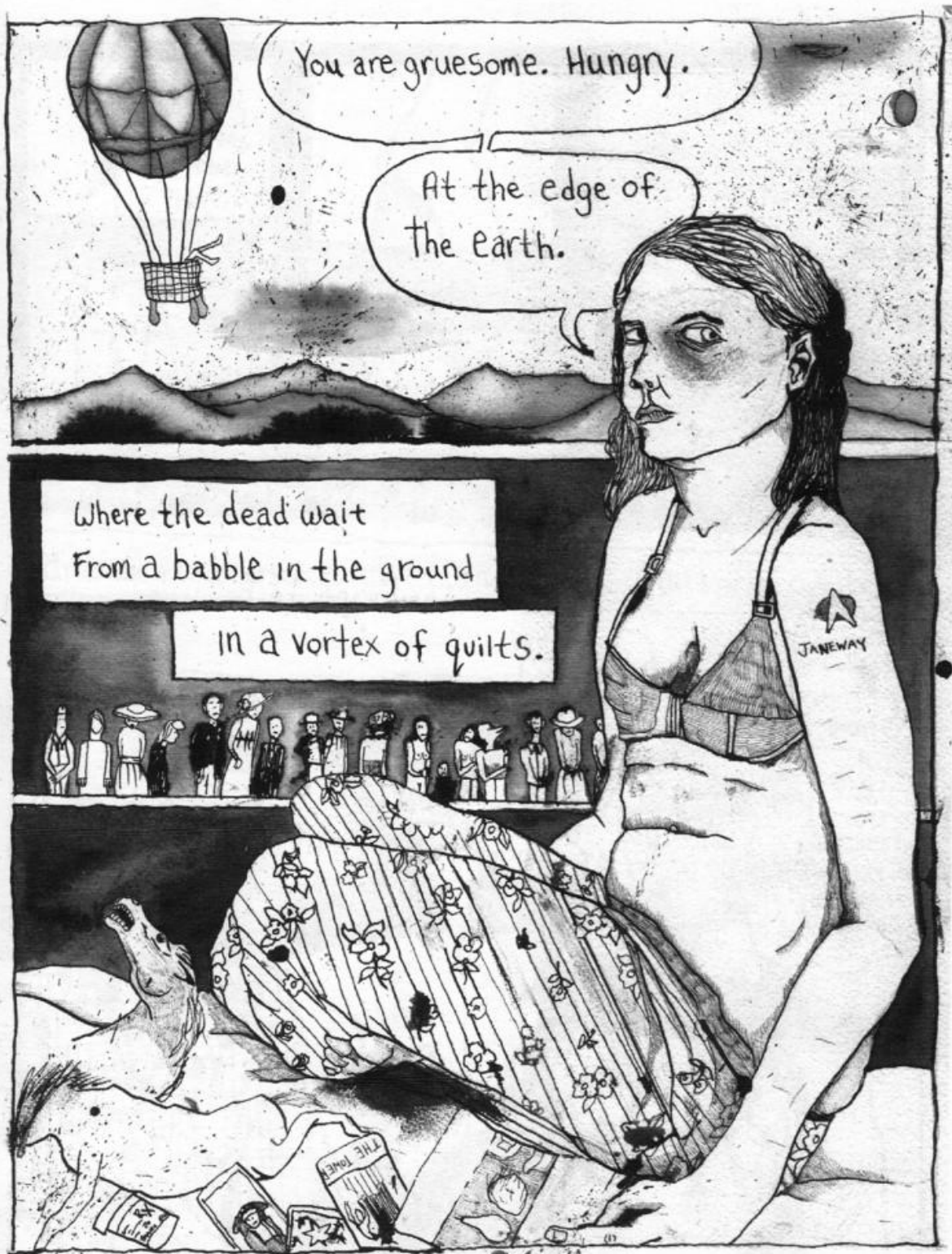
I put my hand onto exquisite forms
of substance made translucent

by your touch.

FIN.







Ruth Stone: An Expert Poet - and a Classy Grandma

Poetry, July/August 2013

There was a period of time after my grandmother's death when I shuddered every time I saw one of the obituaries. Partly, I didn't want to see *any* obituary, no matter what it said - I loved her severely and it felt too final. (The protectiveness and horror I felt at her death surprised even me.) And, on the other hand, I couldn't bear the mythologies surrounding her life, regurgitated, diluted, and perpetuated. The loudest of them all was how she was "unknown" until well into her eighties, how her husband had committed suicide and she lived in obscure poverty, basically until she won the National Book Award in 2002. While the facts of her life are so important to who she is as a poet, the image of a senior citizen fumbling into success through overblown grief took away from the fact that she led a long life dedicated to poetry. From a relatively early age she was publishing and teaching, surrounded by devoted students, and for as long as I knew her (I am thirty) she lived a life rich with books, friends - and success.

I grew up with a single mother of three, just like my own mother had. While Mom struggled to support us with her writing and work, I spent much of my life shuffling around with Grandma to ease the load on Mom. "We're a pair, you and I," Grandma would say. "We're buddies." Early every morning, she'd be up making coffee and rye toast and blaring NPR. I'd sit beside her drinking coffee loaded with vanilla creamer and sugar and listening along. She taught me to read and write early. Immediately I was under the impression that everyone was at least aware of contemporary poetry, if not writing it. One of my most uncomfortable memories was returning to a third grade classroom after missing school and telling the teacher I was sorry but I was at my grandmother's reading. "Oh!" The teacher replied, with peaked interest. "I didn't know your grandmother was a palm reader!"

Grandma spent most of her time in her house in Goshen, Vermont, high in the Green Mountains, on a winding dirt road. The house is large and creaky, ancient, heated with stoves in the middle of the rooms, and filled to the brim with books and writing. In 1953, Grandma won *Poetry* magazine's Bess Hokin Prize, and she received the *Kenyon Review* Fellowship in Poetry in 1956. She used the prize money to purchase the farmhouse, and left only for long winters teaching at SUNY Binghamton and other places. She is buried behind the house, near the raspberry bushes she ordered from a magazine.

When I think of my grandma, I think first of her hair. All my friends' grandmothers had short gray hair and dressed in crocheted sweaters and nylon pants, doling out grisly low-fat cookies every time you came over, talking of

nothing but soap operas and schoolwork. My grandma had vivid red henna-dyed hair, piled up on top of her head with bobby pins, like Katharine Hepburn. She shouted at police officers or any man who called her “ma’am.” She wore “slacks” and giant button-up shirts and religiously rubbed her face with organic moisturizer. She had an incredible look - 1940s to the hilt. With her long neck and high cheekbones, she was a classy grandma.

She loved lying in bed reading P.G. Wodehouse or science books, eating Reese’s Mini Cups and drinking mediocre wine. She had poetry students scrambling around constantly; the most clingy of the bunch she usually let stay for weeks before kicking them out. She was kind, good at praise. But also stubborn and in-your-face. She suffered from constant anxiety. I ran like a literal wild-child in the forests of Vermont, barefoot for whole summers with her, bathing only in the brook. Twice a day she would stand out in the yard with her amazing low-howling voice, used only for getting children who were miles away, deep in their game, to come back and let her know they were still alive.

Her voice! There wasn’t a time of day when poetry wasn’t somewhere in her voice and mind. She talked to herself constantly, most of all in the car. On drives down to the store to get supplies, she’d be having a soft conversation with herself, some of which I could hear, and most of which sounded like a poem being assembled. I’d watch, mystified by this process. I distinctly remember that she said once, “Why did you leave me?” In her slow melodic undertone, she was communicating with poetry, and with the dead. “Once I looked out the window and I saw a whole procession of people going by,” she said to me in Goshen. “And then they just disappeared.”

Her relationship with the world existed with one arm and foot beyond the veil. Like her poetry, she was extremely present, and yet always elsewhere; in the ether, out in the Milky Way. It haunts me now, as I write this. I have her poems sitting next to me - this woman who wrote so often about death. I couldn’t see just how accurate, how wise those poems were, until I got a glimpse of loss. And the irony is: it’s her we’ve lost, and she who gives us this darkly glittering guide:

I sit for hours at the window
Preparing a letter; you are coming toward me,
We are balanced like dancers in memory,
I feel your coat, I smell your clothes,
Your tobacco; you almost touch me.

- from Tenacity

Bianca's Tattoo

from: tattoosday.blogspot.com



She explains:

“At first this was just a tattoo of Pinocchio and Jiminy Cricket. The drawings was based on the original drawings from the book by Carlo Collodi. I was 20 years old and at Antioch College at the time. There was an aspiring tattoo artist who studied there and had a tattoo gun and a make-shift studio and he did it for me as practice . . . (NOT one of my brightest ideas, since it's poorly done. People always ask me 'what is that supposed to be?') The idea had been in homage to my twin brother, Walter, whose nickname is Jiminy/Jimmy, and my mother used to read us the book when we were young. The 'Ex Libris' was added three years ago when I was studying poetry at NYU's MFA program, to honor my love of books and antique book-plates. It means 'In the Library of' and in theory should have my name under it. It was done at Fineline Tattoo in the East Village, by a very nice guy who I guess doesn't work there anymore. . . . I can't remember his name. I do remember he went by one word.”

By way of a poem, Bianca shared this poem, which originally appeared in *Post Road Magazine*:

Someone Will Have to Tell You

Someday soon you will let your hair grow
and look like everyone else. And let there be a kingdom

alongside the kingdom and a forsythia alongside you.
Your mother has walked out of all her pictures

into the ether. There is hair in envelopes and the hair
in locket and the hair growing
in graves. Saints are kneeling over your portrait.
The stratocumulus clouds are forming
in your chest. Fog around your feet.

You'll have to listen to the bananas peeling.
Listen to your books on tape. Little by little
your face will float away
from your other face.

Someday you won't know what to eat. Someone
will have to tell you. Someone will have to carry you
into the back yard so you can hear the Canadian geese
rise hysterically from the river.

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